

Fighting Terrorism and Protecting Our Freedoms in Times Square

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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Most of last Saturday was, at least for some New Yorkers, one of those days that reminded us why this town can be a great place to live. It was one of the first truly summery feeling days, so the parks were full of cyclists, runners, people playing ball and people just hanging out. My day began with a stirring Little League game featuring a great comeback and a tie score and ended at a café in Riverside Park with my children, some of their classmates and some other parents. In the interests of full disclosure, I am a Little League coach, not player.

While we were enjoying our dinner, only a mile or two south of us a very different story was unfolding. I did not learn about the bomb square in Times Square until the following morning. Stories about alleged terrorist plots are not that uncommon so I initially paid little attention to the story. However, a few minute after seeing the headline, I realized that my dinner companions from the previous evening, including one of my sons, had been in Times Square late Saturday afternoon. At that moment, of course, the seriousness of the attempted attack, and what might have happened if events in midtown had unfolded somewhat differently became clear to me.

Much of the coverage of the attempted attack has been framed by a sense of how fortunate we are that this attack was foiled and how our security structures still are not strong enough. While this attempted terrorist attack is a reminder of the reality of the terrorist threat and the need to combat terrorism here in the U.S., it also demonstrates that perhaps we are not so vulnerable as all that. This is not to suggest that the threat is not real, but that we are probably doing something right in the fight against terrorism and that attacking the U.S. may not be as easy as it seems. Since the terrible events of September 11th, we have had foiled several attacks here in the U.S., but have not had any Jihadist attacks on our own soil, other than the Fort Hood shooter. The events of Fort Hood, however, may fit more into the category of crazed lone gunman than terrorist conspiracy.

Faisal Shahzad failed in his attempt to terrorize Times Square because of good police work, a few lucky breaks and because an otherwise unknown veteran, Lance Orton, noticed something strange and called the authorities. Orton is a 56 year old veteran who sells t-shirts in Times Square, but he became an essential part of the security network that helped avert disaster for New York last week that day.

While Orton's story is one of personal heroism and vigilance, it is also a reflection of the often overlooked resources that can help America combat terrorism at home. Most critically, Orton's actions are possible because of, not in spite of, the freedoms that Americans still enjoy. Times Square is not what it used to be, but there is still enough

activity on the street that somebody like Orton can sell t-shirts. Moreover, even though police abuses and abuses of civil liberties connected to fighting terrorism are serious problems in the U.S., people like Orton still feel comfortable enough to call the police when they notice something of concern. This is no small thing because in less free countries, contact with police is something to be avoided at all costs, even if failing to do so could cause others harm.

Importantly, none of the controversial issues which we associate with combating terror helped foil this plan. Although surveillance cameras helped, there was no “enhanced interrogation”, Hollywood scenario involving a ticking bomb and a suspect who refused to talk, telephone surveillance, infiltration of Muslim organizations or racial profiling leading to the capture of Shahzad or the foiling of his plan. Instead ordinary Americans shared information, cooperated with authorities, raised concerns when they saw them and worked closely with the FBI and one of the best police forces in the country. This all underscores that if we are serious about fighting terrorism we must be just as vigilant in protecting our freedoms as we are in stopping terrorists.